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Lake Michigan receives more mercury pollution than any of the four other Great Lakes, according to a draft of a government report.

The National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration's study, released by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, also suggested that a majority of the mercury pollution comes from coal-fired electric power plants in the states that surround Lake Michigan.

Calling Chicago the mercury "hot spot," Kirk said the report, which he requested from NOAA in June, proves the federal government must compel power plants to reduce their mercury emissions sooner than current government regulations.

"We should not wait as long as the administration would like," the congressman said. "We have to move more quickly."

The Environmental Protection Agency in March imposed requirements for coal-fired power plants to reduce their mercury emissions about 35 percent by 2010 and 70 percent by 2018. The mercury-emission regulations for coal-fired plants, the first in U.S. history, also would allow plants to delay installing pollution controls by purchasing credits from cleaner plants.

Mercury is a toxic metal that settles in waterways and accumulates in fish. It poses a variety of health risks, with the greatest risk of nerve damage to pregnant women, women of childbearing ages and young children.

Coal-fired electrical plants account for 16 of the top 25 sources of Lake Michigan mercury pollution, according to 1999 NOAA data, the most current emission information available. While a majority of Lake Michigan mercury polluters are in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin, some of the pollution originates in Texas, Nevada and Kentucky, the draft study said.

The NOAA study is being reviewed by the EPA, which must sign off on it before it is officially released, said Kirk spokesman Matt Towson.

EPA spokeswoman Eryn Witcher said Monday the agency was continuing to work with NOAA on the study.

Environmental groups also said Monday during an ad hoc Congressional hearing at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium that the NOAA study shows that mercury emission reductions must be enforced sooner than the EPA rule dictates.

"Mercury pollution control technology is known, doable and not that expensive," said Howard Lerner, executive director of the Environmental Law and Policy Center. "The only thing standing in the way is owners of coal plants."

"When it comes to mercury, it's too little, too long," he said.

The power industry and Bush administration have resisted more dramatic mercury emission reductions, saying that implementing technology would do little to help public health.

EPA officials also have said mercury-contaminated fish from abroad poses the biggest threat.

Midwest Generation Inc. spokesman Charley Parnell said two of the Chicago-based company's six coal-burning power plants in Illinois will conduct tests next year to determine if technology effectively reduces mercury emissions. Midwest Generation owns the coal-fired plant on the Waukegan lakefront.

"We acknowledge that the first-ever mercury regulation needed to be passed and we're

supportive," Parnell said. "But U.S. coal-fire plants account for less than 1 percent of mercury emissions. This is truly a global issue."